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Matthew Gandy

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# Film as Method in the Geohumanities

Matthew Gandy

*University of Cambridge*

Filmmaking has become an increasing focus of interest within geography, the geohumanities, and related fields. The use of film ranges from enhanced forms of ethnographic fieldwork to the production of feature-length documentaries shown at international festivals. The making of documentaries has become an increasingly significant research method in itself that has the potential to become a widely recognized type of interdisciplinary research output. How should we interpret the role of film in relation to wider epistemological debates over the production of knowledge? How can we contextualize the methodological turn toward film within the broader historiography of filmmaking and the cinematic apparatus? This article argues that documentary film has a distinctive role to play in expanding the research imagination, enhancing pedagogic practice, reaching new audiences, and producing unique cultural artifacts. At the same time, however, the use of film is also entrained in complex debates concerning the verisimilitude of representational practices and the wider institutional context for the production and evaluation of knowledge. **Key Words:** cinematic apparatus, documentary film, geohumanities, representational practices.

The study of film in geography has advanced significantly since the late 1990s including the cultural analysis of specific works, the evaluation of the contribution of individual filmmakers, and the exploration of identifiable genres of representation such as the “city symphony” films of early cinema.<sup>1</sup> In parallel with the focus on film itself, as a specific kind of cultural artifact, there have also been studies of the geography of film production, the distinctive cultural milieu of cinematic spaces, and the architectonic dimensions of visual culture.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I want to focus on two relatively neglected yet interrelated fields within geographical scholarship on film: first, the status of the documentary form as part of a wider reflection on the relationship between cultural artifacts and materiality; and second, the potential for documentary filmmaking to serve as a distinctive geographical method that might parallel the established use of film in anthropology and other disciplines.

The emergence of the geohumanities, and renewed interest in the relationship between geography and the arts, has opened up new possibilities for the use of filmmaking as a research methodology. In particular, there has been a move beyond the use of film as merely a means to record events towards a greater emphasis on the role of filmmaking as a distinctive methodology in its own right. Documentary filmmaking has become more widespread within geography and related fields: academic collaborations are now regularly screened at a variety of international festivals, and increasing numbers of students are interested in exploring the use of film as a research methodology. One might argue that geography is simply “catching up” in the

sense that other disciplines such as anthropology, with similar intellectual antecedents, have long-established traditions in ethnographic filmmaking. Yet debates over the scope and purpose of documentary practice are also underway in anthropology, sociology, and other disciplines (see, for example, Grimshaw 2011). The rise of the geohumanities renders some of these disciplinary distinctions less relevant whilst at the same time posing new questions about the role of the arts and the cinematic apparatus within academic discourse.

How should we characterize the documentary film in relation to other kinds of video-based methods used in geography? Bradley Garrett, for instance, introduces a useful typology that touches on some aspects of documentary filmmaking such as the role of video in data collection, the framing of material for a potential audience, and what he terms “reflexive” or “experiential” forms of filmmaking (see Garrett 2010). There is evidently a point of tension, however, between the idea of film as a cultural artifact, that connects with broader discourses in the visual arts, and a more narrowly social scientific emphasis on participatory video as a kind of collaborative research tool. There has been a tendency within geography to assume that video provides a straightforward methodological opportunity to advance specific theoretical agendas such as nonrepresentational theory or vitalist materialism yet this belies a narrowly Anglo-American form of academism that fails to resolve the uncertain status of film as a kind of internationally recognized form of research output (see Ernwein 2014, 2020). The affinity between the geohumanities and visual methods opens up possibilities for greater narrative experimentation as well as different modes of research dissemination. The unsettling of text-based metaphors for the study of cinematic landscapes, for example, allows for the emergence of new constellations of meaning and interpretation. The current upsurge of interest in film marks a new development, that though related to the longstanding use of video-based methodologies within the social sciences, is nevertheless distinctive in terms of the potential scope for novel forms of interdisciplinary enquiry. The use of film as method invites a more nuanced reflection on the nature of “objectivity” and different forms of academic exposition that clearly extends beyond the sub-disciplinary domain of “film geography.” A more rigorous approach to the use of film in geography, as Jessica Jacobs (2013) suggests, would not simply seek to replicate or elaborate existing approaches within other fields but begin to build a distinctive body of work in its own right.

I have divided my article into three main parts. I begin with an overview of the nature of documentary film in the context of the geohumanities and related fields of work. It is clear that the documentary form has evolved in parallel with the development of photography, cinema, and digital media but cannot be precisely defined. I then turn to the question of representation and different conceptualizations of the role of film in the elucidation of the material realm. On the one hand, documentary is tasked with a testimonial role in the recording of historical events, yet it also connects with the interior landscapes of the human imagination so that the creation of meaning is unfixed, intersubjective, and to a significant degree context dependent. In the final section, I reflect on the epistemology of filmmaking, drawing on aspects of my own experience as a documentary filmmaker. There appears to be something of a hiatus, at least within geography, between on the one hand, an increasing interest in film, yet on the other hand, an uncertain disciplinary or institutional response in terms of supporting new research methods. In terms of the wider framing of my argument I am interested in exploring the potential role of the documentary form as a legitimate kind of academic output that not only widens the potential dissemination of ideas but also plays a direct role in the research process.

## DELINEATING THE DOCUMENTARY FORM

The documentary is conceptually and etymologically linked with the word “document,” or at least some form of evidentiary materialism that can stand in for a fragment of the real; there is a sense in which a cultural artifact that is regarded as a documentary form is connected to some kind of putative reality, whether this be a set of events, material traces, or even the phenomenological experience of thought, consciousness, or a degree of human or non-human sentience. The documentary vantage point can range from the immediacy of a face-to-face interview to the soaring perspective of a geo-tagged bird equipped with a camera: in both cases, however, it is human intentionality that drives the selection and framing of different scenarios. The affective resonance of documentary lies at the intersection between a chosen representational strategy and a potential audience, including intersubjective forms of communicative experience.

Since its positivistic origins in association with nineteenth-century photography the documentary form has undergone a series of material and critical permutations. The birth of early cinema, and experimentation with the moving image, began to place the documentary form in the vanguard of both modernist esthetics and a technically mediated variant of social realism. The significance of the “movement image,” as captured in Gilles Deleuze’s historiographic typology, had its roots in the experimental work of Étienne-Jules Marey and Edward Muybridge, and the study of mobility in humans and other animals (see Deleuze 1986 [1983]; see also Clarke and Doel 2006). These early demonstrations of the moving image provoked intense public curiosity and fostered the development of more sophisticated production studios catering for mass audiences.

The emergence of the documentary form is closely tied to the history of the technical apparatus for producing various kinds of photographic imagery: the apparent immediacy and fidelity of the photographic object, shorn of the subjective mediation of the artist’s hand, have been characterized as a closer likeness to actuality. There are of course exceptions, such as the war artist or natural history illustrator, where a subtly enhanced or filtered imagery is afforded the possibility of greater aesthetic or empathetic verisimilitude. Similarly, the advent of sound recording technologies provides the possibility to represent acoustic environments and further enhance the representational scope of documentary artifacts. The use of more experimental modes of representation such as split screens or acoustic collage can enhance the affective power of documentary filmmaking as a mode of communication.

The history of the documentary form pre-dates the first experimental phase of the moving image. The specific category of works that has come to be gathered under the aegis of the term documentary remains diverse, spanning attempts to record specific events, encounters, or experiences for posterity, as well as the development of more self-consciously experimental idioms. The first phase of documentary experimentation, which became part of the leading edge of early twentieth-century modernism, includes the influential works of Bolesław Matuszewski, Walter Ruttmann, Yelizaveta Svilova, Dziga Vertov, and others. Key works from this period include the “city symphony” films such as *Rain* (1929) directed by Mannus Franken and Joris Ivens, which explores the interplay between light, landscape, and movement in Amsterdam (Figure 1). The juxtaposition of diverse visual textures, often at different scales or vantage points, is a recurring element in modernist experimentation, and provides multiple strands of connection with later genres such as the Japanese New Wave, emphasizing how different orbits of cultural hybridity have permeated through international dimensions to cinematic aesthetics.<sup>3</sup>





FIGURE 1 *Rain* (Dir.: Mannus Franken and Joris Ivens, 1929).  
© European Foundation Joris Ivens.

The oscillation between visual collage and historical documentation is reflected in a range of works. The films of Yelizaveta Svilova, for instance, including *Auschwitz* (1945) and her editing of *Fascist atrocities* (1946), illustrate the specific capacity of the documentary form to serve as a form of cultural memory (see also Stiegler 1998 [1994]). In parallel with these more experimental or testimonial idioms, we also find the extensive use of film to record travel experiences, expeditions, or heavily staged encounters with other cultures under variants of the colonial gaze. The Scottish filmmaker John Grierson's classic definition of documentary first articulated in the late 1920s, as the "creative treatment of actuality" encapsulates a basic tension between "actuality" and "creativity" as if reality was a kind of stage waiting to be recorded (cited in Balsom and Peleg 2016, 13). Yet the question of "documentary truth" has been a recurring focus of contestation since some of the earliest works acquired wider cultural and critical resonance. A case in point is Robert J. Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1934) that depicts the rugged scenery and dangerous livelihoods dependent on shark fishing with carved wooden boats known as *bád iomartha* in the Aran islands west of Ireland. This critically acclaimed work within the documentary canon illustrates the ambivalent relationship between documentary film, especially in the form of the ethno-endurance genre, and the search for a mass audience.<sup>4</sup> Yet as George Stoney's documentary about the film, completed in 1978 reveals, almost nothing depicted within the work is real: the perilous fishing practices had ended in the nineteenth century; none of the family members were actually related; and specific scenes were

staged for dramatic effect. Of course, the question of “the real” does not reside purely within the exact reproduction of material events since there are multiple forms of immaterial truth ranging from emotional longing to mathematical formulae (see Badiou 2009 [2006]). The issue at stake is the portrayal of “actuality” as if it was a direct representation of a specific phenomenon within its own cultural and historical context. As the geographer Laurel Smith points out, in her careful reading of Flaherty’s earlier film *Nanook of the North* (1922), the question of “authenticity” was always mired in a series of essentialist and ultimately static conceptions of cultural diversity that only unraveled under the emerging emphasis on a politics of representation that extended to all aspects of visual culture rather than the narrow question of fidelity to “naturalistic” forms of filmmaking (see Smith 2002).

The growing recognition of documentary film as a powerful element in public culture, connected with the emergence of mass audiences from the 1930s onwards, became reflected in the promotion of more overtly didactic or propagandist roles, exploited by colonial authorities in relation to public health, and by fascist or totalitarian governments for the inculcation of nationalist mobilization (see, for example, Steimatsky 2003). These manipulative intersections between governmentality and the cinematic apparatus would be extensively repudiated under postwar neo-realism and a renewed emphasis on the aesthetic asceticism of *cinéma vérité*. The advent of more lightweight cameras and 16 mm film, for example, enabled the documentary to flourish as part of a reframed cinematic avant-garde emerging in close association with Italian neo-realism, the French New Wave, and other developments in visual culture. Films such as Agnès Varda’s *Black Panthers* (1968) and *Réponse de femmes: Notre corps, notre sexe* (1975) illustrate the confluence of cultural, technological, and political developments that began to reframe the scope and purpose of documentary filmmaking during the 1960s and 1970s. More recently, John Akomfrah’s film *Handsworth songs* (1986), funded by the Black Audio Film Collective, combines archival footage of inner-city Birmingham with direct filming of social unrest during the autumn of 1985, to create a multi-faceted visual montage that now serves as a unique historical document (Figure 2).

The genealogy of the documentary form can be conceived as a series of “productive tensions” from its inception spanning both subject matter and production constraints (Balsom and Peleg 2016, 11). The expense and complexity of filmmaking in comparison with many other forms of visual culture have tended to restrict its degree of autonomy from finance, distribution, and other logistical parameters of cultural production. The rise of digital media has unsettled but not displaced these existing relationships. Similarly, the proliferation of various modes of real-time or “reality representations” of both human and non-human life also disturbs any privileged set of relations between the documentary form, visual culture, and wider society.

The 1990s marks something of a nadir for documentary filmmaking. Emerging from its seeming relegation to the status of a cultural anachronism, far removed from cutting-edge developments in the visual arts, the documentary has recently adopted a multi-faceted presence in contemporary culture, marked by the commercial success of individual films as well as the expanding presence of documentary works in exhibitions (see, for example, Stallabrass 2013). Growing interest in documentary filmmaking has also begun to displace existing genealogies and typologies that had served to stifle wider reflection over the representational practices of visual culture (see Bruzzi 2006 [2000]; Minh-ha 1993). The film scholar B. Ruby Rich refers to a “documentary renaissance” emerging since the 1990s but she is careful to highlight a longer set of enduring interactions between art-house cinema and independent filmmaking underway



FIGURE 2 *Handsworth Songs* (Dir.: John Akomfrah, 1986).  
© John Akomfrah/Black Audio Film Collective; Courtesy Smoking  
Dogs Films.

since the early 1970s (Rich 2006, 108). What marks out the period since the late 1990s is the breakthrough commercial success of some high-profile documentary features, the significance of innovative commissions by independent production companies, and wider trends within the cultural and technological landscape of multi-media visual culture.

### INTIMATIONS OF THE REAL

Despite the resurgence of documentary film since the 1990s it has had to contend with two specific challenges: first, the increasing ubiquity of various forms of digital image manipulation, coupled with a vast increase in the production, storage, and circulation of visual materials; and second, the post-structuralist problematization of conceptual relations between images and a putative reality to which they are in some way connected. Although constructivist interpretations of meaning are less prevalent than ten years ago, the question of subjectivity remains, now dispersed through different human and non-human configurations of materiality, rather than residing within language. The decentering of the human subject under a variety of neovitalist, posthumanist, and post-phenomenological approaches, including a greater openness to other-

than-human geographies and more diffuse patterns of agency, has instituted a new kind of intellectual landscape. There has been a re-materialization of cultural discourse, especially in relation to environmental themes, that marks an intensified disjuncture with the digital realm. Documentary forms must mediate this representational tension between various forms of evidentiary materialism and the proliferation of digital media. New critical perspectives have emerged on the relations between reality and aesthetic form. “It is not a matter of what is in a picture,” notes a participant in the work of the German filmmaker Harun Farocki, “but rather, of what lies behind. Nonetheless, one shows a picture as proof of something which it cannot prove” (cited in Elsaesser 2005, 56). The use of split screens, for example, as used by Farocki and other filmmakers, enables the simultaneous interaction of multiple space-times to produce a kind of enhanced digital *vérité*.

The use of documentary as a research tool can be illustrated by the Swiss artist Ursula Biemann’s *Forest law* (2014), completed in collaboration with the Brazilian architect Paolo Tavares, where she explores the “extractive frontier” for oil in the Ecuadorean rainforest. Biemann’s use of two screens enables a multi-perspectival representation of socio-ecological relations within a vulnerable landscape. The film includes a “forensic performance” to determine levels of toxins in soil derived from previous periods of oil extraction, thereby connecting with the work of the Forensic Architecture program that Tavares has been closely involved with.<sup>5</sup> The documentary draws on specific strands of recent environmental thought such as Isabelle Stengers’s “slow epistemology,” in terms of the pacing and structure of different elements, along with the anthropologist Eduardo Kohn’s interest in multiple temporalities, both human and non-human, that comprise the rainforest as a specific kind of living assemblage (Kohn 2013). The film, along with its accompanying textual materials, explores the practical and political dimensions of extending legal rights to nature in the light of the new Ecuadorean constitution of 2008 (see Biemann 2015). Leaving aside the rich intellectual context for the work, I am interested in how the split-screen mode of representation, as part of the Rights of Nature exhibition held at the Nottingham Contemporary, makes explicit the complexity of the subject matter, and also enables the film to be connected to a wider body of works, thereby providing a thematic context for the overall analytical and aesthetic coherence of the work (Figure 3). The accompanying curatorial essay by the art historian T.J. Demos relates the film to emerging forms of “activist constitutionalism” that seek to connect Indigenous knowledge with legal rights for nature (Demos 2015, 6). An analytical approach to documentary filmmaking can also be illustrated by the shortlisted contribution of the Forensic Architecture collective to the 2018 Turner Prize that combines the close scrutiny of a short video sequence with an extensive range of cartographic and archival sources. In this case, the audio-visual capture of a violent incident in the Negev/Naqab desert serves as the focal point for a multi-faceted reflection on the establishment of “truth” as a collaborative interdisciplinary practice of verification that can produce counter-hegemonic forms of knowledge (see Young 2018). At issue here, and in other similar works, is the political salience of audio-visual evidence and other material traces that can be scrutinized in a public forum, such as an exhibition space.

The complexity of relations between image, memory, and the post-colonial imaginary is captured by the Bangladeshi filmmaker and essayist Naeem Mohaiemen. His intricate three-channel work *Two meetings and a funeral* (2017) includes insights from the Indian historian Vijay Prashad and sets up a juxtaposition between conference settings and other high-level meetings in the 1970s with landscapes of material disarray beyond. Slow tracking shots of rows





FIGURE 3 *Forest Law* (Dir.: Ursula Biemann, 2014).  
Part of a project by Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares entitled *Forest Law*. Installation view from the *Rights of Nature* exhibition, Nottingham Contemporary, 2015. Image by Andy Keate.

of filing cabinets in the United Nations archives denote a sense of intractable diplomatic complexity and an on-going struggle against forgetting possible pasts that never came into being (Figure 4). The use of multiple screens is also deployed by the American-Swiss filmmaker Mark Boulos in *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (2008). This two-channel synchronized video installation juxtaposes the destroyed landscapes of the Niger delta with frantic trading scenes from the New York Stock Exchange and Chicago Mercantile Exchange. In the work of Biemann, Boulos, Mohaiemen, and other filmmakers we are confronted with a kind of representational impasse generated by global capital that is reflected in a series of interconnected spaces of neo-liberal disorientation (see also Jameson 1991, 1992). The use of multiple screens allows the fractured spaces of human experience to be presented in ways that re-iterate the experimental impetus to early documentary filmmaking. Yet such modes of representation are nevertheless closely connected with the nexus of galleries and other cultural spaces that can accommodate more complex forms of display. Furthermore, the interconnections between thought, time, and cultural artifacts can no longer be aligned with existing conceptions of the individual human subject: galleries, auditoria, and other shared cultural spaces produce inter-subjective forms of meaning derived from multiple sources of human and other-than-human interactions, including the architecture of the spaces themselves.

An unprecedented degree of circulation for digitized cultural artifacts has been enabled by new streaming services, multi-media platforms, and other types of screens or surfaces. These



FIGURE 4 *Two Meetings and a Funeral* (Dir.: Naeem Mohaiemen, 2017). Three-channel video. Installation view at documenta 14, Kassel, Germany. Image courtesy of the artist.

changing spaces of interaction have contributed toward what some critics refer to as the “post-cinematic,” as analogue forms of film and photography have morphed into new media and related architectural forms (see Shaviro 2010). The cinematic apparatus has become incorporated into urban space through “a technical-prosthetic afterlife in surveillance videos and body-scans” (Elsaesser 2005, 55). In some cases, this multiplicity of vantage points has been folded back into the cinematic form itself, as in Andrea Arnold’s landscapes of surveillance in *Red Road* (2006), as part of the wider ubiquity of intrusive documentation under the rise of what the philosopher Byung-Chul Han terms the “transparency society” (see Han 2012).

The increasing saturation of the digital cultural realm has led to a huge accumulation of data: there have never been more images either stored or in circulation. There is in the words of the novelist and critic Teju Cole (2016, 177) an “inescapable surfeit” of photographic traces. Yet this vast archive presents specific challenges in terms of “digital vaults,” the proliferation of redundant data storage technologies, and the material decay of the files themselves. The Beta SX digital video, for example, is a broadcast-quality format that was introduced in the mid-1990s but is now effectively obsolete because the compatible cameras and editing equipment are no longer manufactured (see Keiller 2009). There is an erroneous association of “timelessness” with digital cultures that ignores different forms of cultural and technological finitude: to make sense of even a fraction of these materials is a daunting curatorial and epistemological task.

Interest in the “post-cinematic” also connects with the de-centering of global visual culture. The gradual decline of European influence also extends to the cinematic avant-garde and the emergence of so-called “third cinema” in the global South during the 1970s (see Dixon and Zonn 2005). This decentering of a putative cinematic canon, along with the declining phenomenon of “cinephilia,” unsettles the longstanding connections between film theory, continental philosophy, and the humanities. A post-colonial critique of documentary practice holds both aesthetic and epistemological implications, not least through an acknowledgment of longstanding cultural hybridities within twentieth-century modernism, as well as the recognition of a more polycentric set of cinematic developments.

The contemporary proliferation of digital media as a means of production and dissemination has destabilized some of the existing distinctions between the format and forum within which moving images are experienced. There are parallels with the rapid rise of synchronized sound cinema in the 1930s and fears over the displacement of cinema as an experimental art form (see Barber 2002). Yet in spite of these wider trends in visual culture the documentary form persists and has found new audiences driven by interconnections between photojournalism, real-time modes of vernacular documentation, and the rise of social media. Some aspects of filmmaking, especially in terms of narrative complexity, have migrated from cinema to television and other more experimental production opportunities (see Nicolaou 2020). Online streaming services specializing in art-house cinema and documentaries have also been established that offer the potential to connect with new audiences.

The use of documentary film by geographers can take several forms. In some cases, there are long-standing collaborations between universities and existing producers, notably between the UK’s Open University and the British Broadcasting Corporation, to create educational materials that are explicitly designed to support distance learning. Another example, launched in 2019, is the collaboration between the journal *Antipode* and professional filmmakers to record specific intellectual legacies, beginning with the work of Ruth Gilmore Wilson and David Harvey. In other cases, documentaries have been funded as part of a specific research project or in a small number of cases, such as the volcanologist Clive Oppenheimer’s collaboration with the German director Werner Herzog, a film has been supported by a major distribution and production company geared toward a mass audience (Netflix in this instance). In many ways, Oppenheimer and Herzog’s *Into the inferno* (2016) exemplifies the emerging emphasis on the arts-science interface within the geohumanities. Another notable collaboration is that between the geographer Doreen Massey, cultural historian Patrick Wright, and filmmaker Patrick Keiller for *Robinson in ruins* (2010). This film, which was funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council and distributed by the British Film Institute, marks part of Keiller’s long-standing interest in geographies of ruination and displacement (see Clarke and Doel 2007; Daniels et al. 2012). The film is used as an experimental medium through which to explore the dislocated landscapes of late modernity. In these and other works Keiller presents a distinctive cinematic aesthetic, including the slow pacing of events, that frames his argument about time, memory, and the use of film as a double-coded research tool, whereby the fictional figure of Robinson conducts a series of walks and investigations through marginal landscapes.

The intersection between the scale of recent environmental change and the rise of digital media has generated a range of films, video installations, and feature length works, such as the Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky’s *Anthropocene: the human epoch* (2020). The opening sequence of Burtynsky’s documentary, made in collaboration with Jennifer Baichwal

and Nicholas de Pencier, uses aerial footage, portentous music, and excerpts from scientifically inflected commentary to generate a neo-romanticist atmosphere of foreboding. In many ways the film's focus on humanity's collective agency transcending the earth's limits mirrors the unidimensional conceptualization of human history within the earth sciences that has driven the argument for a new geological periodization. What is especially striking about Burtynsky's work is the use of visual spectacle—especially through the use of aerial vantage points—to produce a highly aestheticized form of cinematic actualité where “technical perfection” can stand in for epistemological precision. A similar line of argument has been made in relation to the large-scale compositions used in the photojournalism of Sebastião Salgado and their intimation of “endlessness” and the aesthetics of the “ungraspable” (see Stallabrass 1997, 142, 155). The genre of documentary as spectacle is widespread in relation to representations of nature and landscape and forms part of a longer tradition of natural history filmmaking as a form of technical accomplishment.

The representation of socio-ecological complexity for mass audiences holds inherent tensions. The film *Darwin's nightmare* (2004), for example, made by the Austrian director Hubert Sauper, explores the wider consequences of the introduction of the Nile perch (*Lates niloticus*) in Mwanza, Tanzania. The documentary was well received by critics and festival audiences on its release but has subsequently been criticized for reproducing “stale tropes associated with Afro-pessimism” (Molony, Richey, and Ponte 2007, 599). By sensationalizing poverty and ecological ruin for a predominantly well-heeled public in the global North the film enacts a kind of esthetically refined “toxic pastoral” for the delectation of international festival audiences. Furthermore, the use of local participants as interlocutors for the director's own misconceptions or stereotypes manipulates the possibility of “authenticity” within the narrative structure of the film. In works, such as *Darwin's nightmare* the very category of the documentary, and its relationship to a putative external reality, is thrown into intense confusion: the history of documentary filmmaking, especially through a colonial or neo-colonial lens, is littered with examples of distortions and inaccuracies that are artfully presented.

## CINEMATIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

If we consider the documentary form as a potential kind of research output then what are the wider implications in terms of intellectual creativity or modes of critical interpretation? The transition from writing about film to using film as a form of research method is not straightforward. The oscillation between theory and practice is fraught with ambiguity. Some filmmakers such as Pier Paolo Pasolini developed their own theoretical corpus: in Pasolini's case he contributed toward debates on “free indirect subjectivity” in the 1960s and the prevailing interest in a distinctive kind of cinematic language. Although Pasolini's cinematic exceptionalism, and his insistence on film as a kind of aesthetic portal into a more intense version of reality drew significant criticism, his recognition of an intertextual basis of meaning prefigures later theoretical developments including post-structuralism (see Bruno 1991). A somewhat different example is provided by the American film director Terrence Malick, who moved from the academic realm of Heideggerian philosophy into filmmaking during the 1960s, and subsequently sought to explore aspects of existential thought through his distinctive neo-romanticist cinematography.<sup>6</sup> Although an exalted emphasis on cinematic ontology now



appears anachronistic, the possibility of taking the film seriously as an interdisciplinary terrain of philosophical reflection remains pivotal to the enduring place of the film within academic discourse.

By the 1970s, the theory–practice interface was widely influenced by interest in the ideological significance of cultural artifacts: many independent filmmakers perceived their works to be at the vanguard of radical societal change, now engaging with an enlarged set of social and political questions. For figures such as Agnès Varda, the documentary form offers multiple opportunities to weave semi-autobiographical narratives into her subtly ironic accounts of the process of filmmaking itself. Her *Visages Villages* (2017), for example, is both a chronicle of her journey with the street artist and photographer JR, and a depiction of people in rural France. Working on several levels the film serves as a poignant encounter with the capacity of the visual arts to uplift and reconnect (Figure 5). Similarly, in her exploration of food poverty in *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000) Varda explores the phenomenon of gleaning (the right to gather food left over after the harvest) from a variety of cultural and historical vantage points: her larger focus concerns the wastage of edible food and the brutal devalorization of both people and agricultural products. In one memorable scene, she finds a discarded reproduction of Jean-François Millet’s painting *Des glaneuses* in a junk shop, showing figures stooped over an empty field, whilst in another frame we see an arrangement of misshapen potatoes that have been discarded as unsaleable. In terms of the critical context for the analysis of documentary film, particularly in the wake of its recent resurgence, we can detect a movement away from the semiological-structural tradition, with its implicit attachment to epistemological universality, towards more corporeal and phenomenological modes of interpretation (see Hughes 2012; Smail 2010).



FIGURE 5 *Visages Villages* (Dir.: Agnès Varda, 2017).  
© 2017 ciné-tamaris—social animals.

The gap between a simple visual archive and a feature length documentary film is immense: there are multiple steps towards the potential inclusion of a film in a festival, or reaching a high enough technical standard to be shown in a fully equipped auditorium, or having the narrative potential for mass distribution via streaming or other means. If a film forms part of the planned output for academic research, an initial challenge is to convince funding agencies that a documentary can be a legitimate part of a project's methodology, as well as a contributory element in plans for wider dissemination. Many if not most reviewers of research proposals will have no direct experience of filmmaking and are likely to be uncertain about judging the value or feasibility of complex "non-academic" outputs. There is, therefore, an innate degree of scepticism, especially within the social sciences, toward the role of film in academic research.

The question of funding is inescapable because filmmaking is so expensive: even a simple thirty-minute documentary of broadcast quality will incur a range of costs from equipment hire to professional inputs for specific tasks such as cinematography, production, editing, rights clearance, sound design, color correction, subtitling and so on. If academics devote their energies to filmmaking their labor is not free: even a small-scale production involves immense inputs of time. The increasing micro-management of time within the neo-liberal academy generates tensions between different kinds of activities so that more complex, experimental, or long-term research outputs such as films (or books) are under relentless pressure from other duties

If funding for a film has been secured there is a complicated process of converting an idea—often little more than a paragraph in the original funding application—into a fully developed proposal or "picture treatment" within which a collage of sound and image can be connected with a narrative framework or conceptual structure. Various steps such as an exposé leading toward a progressively more detailed storyboard of audio-visual ideas must be converted into a programme of activities that might include location filming, face-to-face interviews, and the use of specific vantage points. The chaos of filming—weather, illness, interpersonal strife—must be painstakingly transformed into a cultural artifact that at least makes some creative sense for the director, the producer, and others closely involved in the project. In parallel with this process, there are other vital tasks, such as the collection of archival sources including photographs or old newsreel footage that might be incorporated into the editing process. The soundscapes will also need mixing and refinement, especially if the film is to be shown as a DCP (Digital Cinema Package) in a fully equipped auditorium. Permissions must be negotiated for image use, music rights, or any other materials under copyright. The choice and size of any text or sub-titles will have to conform to specific requirements including the synchronization of different cinematic elements. In the case of my most recent film *Natura Urbana: the Brachen of Berlin* (2017), for example, whilst the filming was completed in under 4 weeks, the editing and post-production work took nearly 2 years to complete (Figure 6). The filmmaking itself becomes one element in an intense and complicated sequence of activities including distribution, promotion, and liaison with festival organizers and other opportunities for the work to be shown.

Unlike academic books or articles for which the parameters of exposition and reader expectations are largely known for particular fields of inquiry, the completion of a film as a form of research output engenders wider sets of uncertainties. Audiences may be predominantly non-academic, for instance, or at least unfamiliar with many of the conceptual debates or specialist forms of knowledge to be explored in the film. The editing process emerges as critical



FIGURE 6 *Natura Urbana: the Brachen of Berlin* (Dir.: Matthew Gandy, 2017). © Matthew Gandy.

here in terms of rendering forms of complexity potentially intelligible: even slight variations in narrative structure or sound design can alter the implied meaning or affective resonance of the work. Academic writers are used to changing words or sentences as part of the editing process for a written text but with film, they must contend with a “multi-channel” set of possibilities as different layers of sound, image, or narration produce distinctive changes in emphasis. There is no such thing as an “unedited” film: even those documentaries that are widely regarded as unmediated are nevertheless the outcome of an intricate sequence of decision-making. An interesting example is *Leviathan* (2012), directed by the anthropologists Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor, which explores the brutal world of an Atlantic fishing trawler. Developed in association with the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University, the film uses specific editing strategies to produce a visceral viewing experience that is also narratively opaque. The distinctive reliance on Go-Pro cameras—a kind of late-modern reprise of Dziga Vertov’s original Kino Eye—emerged from the accidental loss of equipment at sea yet has become a signature element in the film’s disorientating atmosphere (see Lim 2012). Similarly, with the earlier *Sweetgrass* (2009), directed by Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor, the pace and style of the cinematography, focused on the herding of sheep in Montana, becomes the narrative rhythm of the film itself (see Grimshaw 2011).

A complicating factor in documentary filmmaking is the anticipation of the precise circumstances under which the finished work might actually be seen, such as a hand-held device, a laptop computer, a data projector, or a purpose-built auditorium with multiple sound channels. Within an auditorium or even a well-equipped classroom, there is a “double coding” of the cinematic landscape between the representation of space and the experience of film so that

affective atmospheres become intensified (see Gandy 2003). The space of representation is inseparable from the intersubjective affective dynamics of collective aesthetic experience (see Brennan 2004). The underlying narrative becomes more rhetorically powerful in cinematic terms when presented at a higher level of audio-visual sophistication.

Unlike the experience of reading it is possible to alter the temporalities of film in specific ways. A sensory aesthetics of time can be conveyed by modifying the pace and rhythm of the film: a more contemplative mood can be evoked or in other cases a sense of anxiety or anticipation. With more experimental works we can detect a certain fidelity to “slowness” à la Stengers that can confound audience expectations. An interesting example is the Spanish director Victor Erice’s film *El Sol del membrillo* (1992) that chronicles the efforts of the artist Antonio López to paint the quince tree growing in his garden. We are immersed in López’s efforts to accurately depict a tree that is in a constant state of change: his work commences in late September but his task in coming days and weeks becomes one of the almost overwhelming complexity. With each day that passes López must contend with the subtleties of changing sunlight, the gradual alteration in the shape and color of the leaves, and the weight of ripening fruit changing the structure of the tree.

The institutional stance toward filmmaking in geography and allied disciplines is ambivalent. In the UK context, for example, documentary films can be put forward as examples of “impact” under the government’s Research Excellence Framework but the committees or assessors that form a judgment about the quality of these works are unlikely to know anything about filmmaking and will seek to grade these kinds of audio-visual outputs *without* seeing them. Only proxy indicators of merit, such as letters provided by festival organizers, or perhaps even more speculatively in a humanities context, evidence of influence on policy making, comprise part of the formal “evaluation” exercise. The situation within anthropology, especially in the United States, is somewhat different, however, with a strong tradition of filmmaking, often with formal institutional support, as part of an expanded range of ethnographic fieldwork ranging from shorter experimental films to widely acclaimed features that receive global distribution (see, for example, Banks and Ruby 2011; Pink 2013). A significant question to consider is whether geography, in particular, might follow the visual ethnographic revival underway in anthropology as part of a wider re-evaluation of aesthetic dimensions to fieldwork (see Grimshaw 2011).<sup>7</sup> In the case of geography, the growing interest in post-phenomenological readings of space and landscape, along with the use of experimental methodologies such as walking, has begun to open up new possibilities for audio-visual aspects to ethnographic work.

The recent upsurge of interest in film as method has prompted reflections on how research-based films might be formally integrated into peer-reviewed publishing protocols to ensure that work of this kind is adequately recognized. April Baptiste, for instance, suggests that a “research-film” can equal the rigor of an academic publication and offers some suggestions for how a double-blind review process might be emulated. Yet Baptiste’s characterization of film as a “medium for research-reporting” inadvertently limits the potential scope of filmmaking as a form of creative as well as methodological experimentation (Baptiste 2016, 465). There is a serendipitous quality to filmmaking that is not easily subsumed within a social science-based epistemological or evaluative framework. Academic filmmakers inhabit a complex zone between methodological experimentation and institutional expectations for the conduct of research (see Mistry and Berardi 2012). Baptiste rightly highlights the possibilities for the film to capture subtle aspects of interviews such as “speech inflections and facial expression”



(p. 468), through a kind of enhanced mode of data collection, but perhaps what is really hinted at here is the opportunity for academic filmmakers to bring a degree of rigor, self-reflection, and transparency to video that is often occluded within the wider field of visual culture. A more sophisticated approach to the use of visual methods would include a greater understanding of the technical parameters of cinematic exposition as well as the often hidden political assumptions that lie behind various forms of normative or participatory filmmaking (see, for example, Kindon 2003, 2016; Walsh 2016). I would suggest an alternative pathway in which academic filmmakers should strive to advance their own creative skills and technical competence, including a wider appreciation of the cinematic apparatus in all its complexity, and seek out opportunities to show their work on its own terms as a cultural artifact of potential interest to a public audience both within and beyond the academy.<sup>8</sup> Rather than seek to integrate film within existing evaluative paradigms for the social sciences, that are already deeply flawed, it makes better sense for geographers to develop new critical spaces that extend outside more familiar academic settings.

## CONCLUSIONS

“Documentary,” write Balsom and Peleg (2016, 13), “has never ceased to be marked by multiple uncertainties, whether in its relation to reality, its criteria of value, or even in the very parameters of its self-construction.” Questions of purpose and definition clearly also apply to epistemological disputes over the status of a film within geography, anthropology, and related disciplines. Indeed, part of the advantage of working with film is that many of these tensions are brought to the fore: the relations between aesthetics, politics, and the veracity or otherwise of visual culture become unavoidable. The shifting status of the documentary form as a unique kind of cultural artifact illustrates the degree to which the production of meaning is inherently intersubjective and also historically contingent.

Should documentary be charged with a wider set of social or political responsibilities beyond more experimental or specialist modes of cultural production? Is there an obligation for the documentary form to be accessible or easily comprehensible? In both cases, the answer must be no. The question of responsibility is complicated by the circumstances within which a film can be made or disseminated along with the potentially flattening effects of a “common sense” notion of causality or interpretation: a documentary should be free to generate new lines of thought rather than replicate what is already “known,” or worse still, simply conform to perceived expectations on the part of an intended audience (such an approach would be inherent, for example, within the genre of narrowly propagandist or clientelist filmmaking). The question of comprehensibility or otherwise should also be resisted because the affective resonance of film is so variegated, and forms of subjectivity so heterogeneous, that to second guess the threshold of meaning would unnecessarily circumscribe the creative process. There is an improvisational and serendipitous quality to filmmaking, and its reception, that underlines the distinctive epistemological contribution of film to diverse fields of critical inquiry.

The use of film as method needs to be set in the context of a wider reflection on different interpretations of “the real” that encompass not just external events but also the inner landscapes of the human imagination. Something approaching this distinction is made by the Deleuzian conception of the “time-image” as a more sophisticated variant of cinematic realism

that resides in the space of thought and imagination (see Deleuze 1989 [1985]). Yet an emphasis on an “inner truth” or “interior reality” that must ultimately reside in the mind of the filmmaker poses questions about relations between authenticity, truth, and filmmaking that have resurfaced with respect to the treatment of the documentary form as a kind of historical document with potentially wider social and political significance. The relation of film, as a specific kind of cultural artifact, to a set of material events or situations lies at the heart of the attempt to delineate the documentary form from what might be characterized as purely experimental or fictional works. The relationship between form, context, and meaning can never be reduced to a putative set of external relations to the thematic focus of a documentary. The connections between ideology and materiality, for instance, permeate different dimensions to the production process and cannot be circumvented by a narrowly formalist emphasis on a cultural artifact in isolation.

A focus on the documentary form invites an expanded conception of the “text” as a specific arrangement of different material and cultural elements. Any cinematic artifact forms part of a complex historiography of different components ranging from the evolution of the cinematic apparatus itself to the changing form and status of visual culture within society. An improved status for documentary film as a legitimate research output within geography and the geohumanities rests on an elaboration of existing frameworks for the evaluation of knowledge that can recognize both the intrinsic value of film and also develop ways of better integrating multimedia works within critical academic discourse.

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## NOTES

1. For an overview of the analysis of film within geography see, for example, Dixon (2014) and Lukinbeal and Zimmermann (2006). Early contributions to the field include the influential essay collections edited by Aitken, Leo, and Zonn (1994) and Cresswell and Dixon (2002). For further sources on the definition of the documentary form see, for example, Eitzen (1995), Renov (2004), and Ruby (2000).
2. On the geographies of film production and consumption see, for example, Shiel (2012) and Barber (2010) respectively.

3. Modernist influences on visual texture and cinematic experimentation in the Japanese New Wave can be seen in the work of Hiroshi Teshigahara and others. See Gandy (2011).
4. Elements of the staged “ethno-endurance” genre persist in contemporary filmmaking such as the work of Werner Herzog. See, for example, Gandy (2012).
5. For further details of the forensic architecture project see Weizman (2017).
6. For a critique of an esthetics of mystification see in particular Adorno (2003[1973; 1964]).
7. An interesting recent example from the UK is the Economic and Social Research Council funded anthropology project and accompanying exhibition entitled *Traces of the future: archeology of modern science in Africa* (2017) in which the display of artifacts, photographs (taken by Evgenia Arbugaeva), and films (directed by Mariele Neudecker) creates a multi-media immersion in an abandoned scientific research station in Tanzania (see Geissler et al. 2016).
8. A key intervention here is the “filmgeographies” collective, initiated by Jessica Jacobs and Joseph Palis, that grew out of a regular screening festival for short films held in collaboration with the American Association of Geographers. Other important resources include the “Geographers on film” initiative, underway for over forty years, with the archives co-curated by the AAG and the Library of Congress.

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MATTHEW GANDY is Professor of Geography at the University of Cambridge, Downing Place, Cambridge, CB2 3EN, UK. E-mail: [mg107@cam.ac.uk](mailto:mg107@cam.ac.uk). He is an award-winning documentary filmmaker and his research interests span landscape, infrastructure, and biodiversity. His books include *Concrete and clay: reworking nature in New York City* (The MIT Press, 2002), *The fabric of space: water, modernity, and the urban imagination* (The MIT Press, 2014), *Moth* (Reaktion, 2016), and *Natura urbana: ecological constellations in urban space* (The MIT Press, 2022).